

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

A recent issue of the *Soviet War News* in an article entitled "Believers and Atheists Unite Against Hitler" asserted, on the ground of the provisions of the decree of 1918, separating the Church from the State, and of the article in the Constitution dealing with religion, that "no citizen of the Soviet State has ever been persecuted or can be persecuted for his religious beliefs."

RELIGION IN RUSSIA

So complete a misrepresentation of the facts during the past twenty-five years can hardly pass unchallenged. The article in the Constitution recognizes freedom of religious worship and permits anti-religious propaganda, and it was made perfectly clear in the Soviet press, when the article was amended to its present form in 1929, that the change meant that the only religious activity permitted was that of worship and that religious propaganda of every kind was prohibited. What the restrictions on religious activity mean in practice was explained in C.N.-L. No. 109. So far, moreover, from no citizen having been persecuted for his faith, the number of Christians who have lost their lives and property is enormous.

It does appear, however, that in spite of the irreconcilability between the Communist philosophy and Christian faith, there has been since 1936 a remarkable change in practice in the attitude of the Soviet authorities to religion. It may have been influenced by the fact that the Godless movement was meeting with less success than was hoped. It was estimated in 1930 that its membership, which was then 5 million, would by 1937 have reached 22 million. In actual fact it has fallen to 3½ million.

The following are some of the more important recent changes. They are taken in the main from an article by Canon P. E. T. Widdrington in *Christendom*¹ for March, from which he and the editor have given me permission to quote.

(1) Civil rights have been restored to the clergy, and priests are now allowed to exercise the franchise.

(2) Since 1940 the seven-day week has been brought back and the Christian Sunday restored as a universal day of rest.

(3) School text books have been revised and offensive passages relating to religion have been excised.

(4) Restrictions have been placed on blasphemous attacks on religion in the cinema, theatre and education. Anti-religious tests for the army and civil service have been abolished.

(5) The manufacture of ikons has been legalized.

(6) There has been relaxation of the labour disciplinary laws to enable peasants to attend Sunday worship and to keep the great festivals.

(7) There is now general recognition of the part played by Christianity in the early stages of Russian civilization. The phrase "the rôle of religion" now occurs quite frequently in Soviet papers.

¹ Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 2s. Annual subscription 7s. 6d.

(8) There is a tacit understanding that no objection will be raised to Orthodox clergy who are serving as soldiers ministering to their fellow members at the front.

(9) The vast publishing undertaking of the Godless Union has been suspended on the ground of paper shortage. Since during the last ten years this undertaking published 1,700 books and issued magazines with a sale of 43 million copies, the restriction of anti-religious propaganda is severe.

There has thus taken place a great change in the practical attitude of the State to religion. It may be too much to expect that there will be public abrogation of the laws relating to religion, but they may remain in practice to a considerable extent a dead letter, just as in this country, as Canon Widdrington says, the law about the burning of heretics remained on our statute book long after the people would have refused to tolerate an execution for heresy.

The present situation is summed up by Canon Widdrington in the following terms :—

"I have written of the failure of the Godless attack. But by that I mean that the Faith persists in the souls of 60,000,000 Russian men and women. It is a wonderful testimony to the hold the Church has on its people. The Faith lives in its human temples, but the Church as an organization has suffered unimaginable damage. According to a statement issued by the Soviet Press Bureau on August 22nd of last year there were 30,000 religious associations registered by the Government, but only 8,338 places of worship. The places of worship include those of the sects, the Jews and other religions. In 1914, the Orthodox Church had 57,173 churches and 23,503 chapels. To-day they have the use of 4,225 churches and a few chapels. A reason for the drop in the number of churches, apart from wanton destruction during the Terror and their appropriation to secular purposes since the Soviet Government was properly organized, is the inability of the priests and congregations to pay the monstrous tax assessments and fire insurance placed on them by the local Soviets. In 1914 there were over 90,000,000 communicants. To-day the total number of Orthodox believers is not more than 60,000,000. To put the facts concisely : the Church has lost one-third of its faithful, three-quarters of its bishops, about 90 per cent of its clergy, 90 per cent of its buildings and 97 per cent of its monasteries. The most serious of all these losses is the astounding fall in the number of clergy. There are still many hundreds of clergy in the great penal settlements in Siberia and elsewhere, and there are hundreds earning their living in secular occupations. Let us put the number at 10,000 : a modest estimate. The total number of clergy available would be utterly inadequate to meet the needs of the parishes. In 1914 there were 112,500 parish clergy : 51,000 priests and 61,500 deacons. In addition, there were 91,000 monastic clergy."

It will take years to increase the clergy sufficiently to meet the minimum requirements of the parishes, but even this is only part of the problem. Training of the clergy which may have served in days past will not suffice to enable them to interpret the Gospel to a generation whose mind and outlook have been largely shaped by Marxist ideas. The problem is not peculiar to Russia, though it is found there perhaps in its most acute form. It is part of the immense task of re-evangelizing the Western world, which has not only forgotten the Gospel, but abandoned to a large extent the elementary religious and moral presuppositions on which it rests.¹

THE BOMBING OF TOWNS

I have had several letters about the bombing of German towns. One is from Professor G. H. C. Macgregor of Glasgow, who makes a definite challenge to the News-Letter. He recalls that it was said in an earlier issue that the whole Christian tradition is opposed to the view that everything is permissible in war and that, while the line may be difficult to draw, there *is* a line to be drawn somewhere. He maintains that non-pacifist Christians are always pushing the line farther and farther back until it disappears altogether, and that it is because Pacifists have seen from the beginning that this was bound to happen that they have refused as Christians to have anything to do with war.

The challenge is one which Christians are bound to face, for the simple reason that we cannot take for granted that what the national cause demands, or seems to

¹ The problem is the subject of a brief article by Father T. Nersoyan, an Armenian priest, in the Bulletin of the Commission of the Churches for March. (21 Meadow Way Green, Letchworth, Herts. 8d.)

demand, is something to which the Christian conscience can consent. Christians owe allegiance to a higher authority than the nation. All our actions, individual and national, have to be brought to the bar of an impartial and searching divine judgment. Unless we are prepared, even in war-time, to examine our conduct in the light of the laws of God, we may as well let Christianity go and swallow at a gulp the Nazi creed.

Professor Macgregor reminds me that it was said in the News-Letter that the deliberate killing of non-combatants is murder, and argues that "if what happened in Lübeck and Cologne is not the deliberate killing of non-combatants, then words have no meaning."

The problem is a real one, but it does not seem to me to have been rightly formulated. We cannot consider Lübeck and Cologne in isolation from the total context of the war. We cannot leave out of the picture the unimaginable horrors on an unimaginable scale which the Axis Powers have perpetrated. Lübeck and Rostock are ports vital to the enemy for the supply of his armies in Russia, Finland and Norway. What they have suffered is immeasurably less than the devastation and suffering which the Germans have caused in Russia. If the bombing of their ports and industries is the necessary, or most effective, means of putting an end to the greater cruelty, it may be, among the choices that are actually open in the waging of war, the one to be preferred on grounds of humanity. The Pacifist has no convincing answer to the question by what practical means the unspeakable cruelties of lawless and brutal men may be restrained, and the enslavement of the peoples of Europe prevented, except by force of arms.

Sir Archibald Sinclair, in reply to a recent question in the House of Commons, stated that the policy of His Majesty's Government in regard to bombing is unchanged. It is to destroy the enemy's capacity to make war by bombing his war factories, means of transport and military stores, wherever they may be found. If the *intention* is to destroy the enemy's capacity for making war, the incidental and undesired killing of non-combatants, even if it be on a large scale, cannot rightly be described as deliberate. The real line is between action directed to a genuine military objective and action which goes beyond it and is merely wanton destruction. It is a line that is by no means easy to maintain and much is at stake in holding to it.

It will make the whole difference to the future whether we control war and make it the instrument of a genuinely human purpose or whether we surrender to its blind fury so that war controls us. No one who has delighted in human skill and craftsmanship can feel anything but regret at the destruction of the architectural glories of Lübeck. Works of art are not a national but a universal possession. Not the Germans only, but the world is poorer for their destruction; the loss is ours as well as theirs. The Nazis boast that our own historic monuments will soon become only historic memories. Let them be vandals, if they will. Let us remain, if we can, civilized and sane, loathing the insanity of ruthless destruction and retaining our reverence for the monuments of human labour and skill.

When we pass from the sphere of civilization to the deeper level of religion, the problem becomes far more acute. It is the question of the infliction of torture and death on the relatively innocent. I take the case of children because their case is so unanswerably clear. As with works of art, there is something universal in the innocence of children. When Jesus took a little child and set him in the midst, no one can suppose that it would have made the smallest difference to His action if it had been a German or a Japanese child, the Germans and Japanese being what they are to-day. We have to recall these things, even in war time—most of all in war time—because they enshrine values with which the whole future of mankind is bound up. To cast them from us is to be utterly damned.

To rain bombs from the air that will destroy, maim and torture children is an act of which the consequences are devilish. I do not deny that it may be a necessary act, in order that the children of the world may be saved in the future from still greater sufferings and yet more deadly injuries to their souls. But it is an act which only that motive can keep from searing our souls.

How far the laying waste of towns is inseparable from attacks on military targets, either because these targets are mixed up with dwelling-houses, or because the intensification of ground defences makes precision of aim impracticable, is a question requiring for its answer a knowledge of strategy and military technique possessed only by those responsible for the conduct of the war. What is demanded by the moral issues involved is that the necessity should be scrutinized with especial care.

These are not sentimental questions out of tune with the realism of war. There is a real danger that, unless we are all the time alive to them, we may succumb to the drag of the evil we are opposing and become increasingly dehumanized and brutalized and, therefore, less capable of creating a true civilization.

In order to rid the world of an intolerable evil we are compelled ourselves to commit acts not easily distinguishable from those of fiends. Contrary to our will and intention, we are involved with our enemies in a solidarity of sin. The evil that we would not, that we do, and cannot help doing. Unless we know the tragic nature of our situation, it will overwhelm us. The more we are forced by the necessities of war into acts of inhumanity, the more we must learn to loathe them.

Many will say that this is impossible—that we cannot wage war successfully and at the same time loathe it and cling passionately to the values which war denies. If that is true, the game is lost. But I do not believe that it is true. *Le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche* is a standard which our Western civilization has cherished. It has been exemplified in the lives of many individual soldiers. Sir William Rothenstein, after two years of close association with the Air Force, regards it as the living symbol of its characteristic spirit.¹ Abraham Lincoln fought a war without forgetting or surrendering the high purpose with which he engaged in it and laid thereby the foundations of an enduring peace.

If we resist the danger of being swept away by blind passion and insist as responsible moral persons on knowing what we are doing, the possibility remains open that the truth which can save us—and the world with us, and in part through us—may break in upon us. We may be led through our experiences to discover the need of a genuine change of mind. We may find that the only way to get things right is by a real repentance—repentance not only for our share in a state of things that compels us in the defence of our ragged justice to commit wrongs against the innocent, but for a false way of thinking which has infected and perverted our whole way of life. The door will then be open for new ideas to take possession of us and recreate our society.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

¹ *Men of the R.A.F.* By Sir William Rothenstein and Lord David Cecil. Oxford University Press. 12s. 6d.

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